



This issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS* is devoted to **100** fish and wildlife species the North Dakota Game and Fish Department has identified as **species of conservation priority**. What are species of conservation priority? First, some background.

NORTH DAKOTA'S **100** SPECIES OF CONSERVATION PRIORITY *What are They?*

Introduction by Steve Dyke
Species Profiles by Sandra Hagen and Patrick Isakson

For the past decade, conservation agencies, wildlife organizations, politicians, conservation groups and interested citizens have worked to establish dependable funding for managing nongame species, or those animals that are not hunted, fished or trapped. Historically, nongame fish and wildlife haven't received much attention in terms of management at the state level, primarily due to a lack of funding.

In 2001, Congress approved legislation authorizing federal dollars for states to use in developing fish and wildlife conservation and restoration programs for these species. Initially called the Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program, it is now called State Wildlife Grants, or SWG. While the SWG program promotes a comprehensive approach to conservation of all species, funding is intended to benefit species of greatest conservation need.

For North Dakota, we identified species in decline at the national, regional or state level, or species whose population status is not well known, but thought to be in decline. We also identified those species that may not be in decline, but a large percentage of the population occurs in North Dakota. These are referred to as species of conservation priority.

Once species are identified, available money should be directed toward maintenance or

enhancement of those species, with primary intent of preventing them from becoming listed as federally threatened or endangered. The legislation also allows states to include game animals as species of conservation priority.

Preventing species from becoming listed, or lost, is important. From an ecological perspective, loss of a seemingly insignificant species can cause other animals to decline, or vanish. Such declines are often hard to predict, as many of these relationships are not well understood. Even so, animals that live here are part of North Dakota's legacy, and any loss, many people believe, is tragic.

A federal threatened or endangered species listing has the potential to influence how public and private land is managed and used. The cost of protection or restoration of a listed species is far greater than preventing its decline in the first place.

Developing the Department's list took time. For the past year, biologists compiled existing information on birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and freshwater mussels. This included surveys on range and distribution, presence or absence, and previous efforts to identify rare or declining species. After review, a preliminary list of species of conservation priority was developed, and passed to more than 60 natural resource agencies, organizations, academia and public experts to get a broader perspective before developing the final list.

The list is separated into three different levels or categories, giving priority to species that need conservation efforts the most. Though the SWG program has provided a substantial amount of new money, it is not nearly enough to address the immediate conservation needs of all 100 species on the list. Individual species were placed in appropriate levels based on their degree of conservation needs, availability of non-SWG funding, and whether distribution is limited in North Dakota.

Second, the list also includes several game species. While game species have other, more traditional funding sources, primarily hunting and fishing license fees and excise taxes, sometimes it's not enough. Game species may receive SWG funding as long as the needs for other level 1 species have been met.

Third, this is a dynamic process. The list will change over time. We have only limited

or dated information for many species because they have not been studied in depth, or with any regularity. Species will be added or removed if new information on their population status becomes available, or primary habitat conditions change for better or worse.

Now that the list is developed, the next step is for Game and Fish staff to complete a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy by October 2005. The CWCS – basically a plan for how North Dakota intends to safeguard species of conservation priority – is required of all states that accept SWG funding. Strategies for doing this may include gathering distribution and abundance information; describing locations and relative conditions of key habitats; identifying monitoring plans; and detailing survival problems and remedies for protecting species.

Planning these strategies will often involve other land management agencies, conservation groups and private landowners, and putting the plan into action will take much more time and additional resources.

A key requirement of each state's CWCS is coordinating with citizens and federal, state, tribal and local agencies, and the public. For the past year, Game and Fish staff have updated partners on the SWG program, and initiated studies and solicited comments on aspects of the CWCS.

During the next several months, Game and Fish biologists will write the CWCS and provide progress reports. For more information, or to provide comments on this process, call Game and Fish at 701-328-6382.

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LEVEL I - [View list of Level-I Species](#) - (150Kb PDF)

Species having a high level of conservation priority because of declining status either in North Dakota or across their range; or a high rate of occurrence in North Dakota constituting the core of the species' breeding range, but are at-risk range wide, and non-SWG funding is not readily available to them.

LEVEL II - [View list of Level-II Species](#) - (211Kb PDF)

Species having a moderate level of conservation priority; or a high level of conservation priority, but a substantial amount of non-State Wildlife Grant funding is available to them.

LEVEL III - [View list of Level-III Species](#) - (114Kb PDF)

North Dakota's species having a moderate level of conservation priority, but are believed to be peripheral or do not breed in North Dakota.



Geological Features of North Dakota

This map – minus highways, county roads and other byways – offers a look at North Dakota's different types of habitat inhabited by humans and animals alike. The fate of North Dakota's species of conservation priority is tied to the presence or absence of these habitats.

East of Missouri River is home to the following:

- **Missouri Coteau** – Rolling and irregular terrain; mixed-grass prairie interspersed with a variety of wetlands. Tilled for small grains and row crops, and much is used for cattle grazing.
- **Drift Prairie** – Flat to gently rolling; mixed-grass prairie of western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, bluestem, side oats and blue grama. High concentration of temporary and seasonal wetlands. Much of the area is extensively tilled for small grains and row crops.
- **Red River Valley** – Flat with rich soil; tallgrass prairie consisting of big and little bluestem, switchgrass, and indiangrass. Much of grassland replaced by agriculture. The few sand deltas, beach ridges, and saline areas contain the only remnants of native prairie. Cottonwood, willow, green ash, burr oak, and American elm line the Red River.
- **Turtle Mountains** – Platform of rolling terrain; deciduous forest of bur oak, aspen, green ash, paper birch, boxelder, sumac, and snowberry. Several large wetlands and lakes.

West of Missouri River is home to the following:

- **Badlands** – Highly dissected and rough terrain; tall buttes and rocky outcroppings, predominantly short-grass prairie scattered with cottonwood riparian areas, Rocky Mountain juniper hillslopes, and sagebrush flats. Extensive cattle grazing.
- **Missouri Slope** – Semiarid rolling terrain; unglaciated short-grass and mixed-grass prairie of blue grama, needlegrass, little bluestem, and prairie sandreed. Farming limited by drier climate, considerable cattle ranching. Missouri River breaks dominated by cottonwood forest.